



Expertise
and insight
for the future

William Conner Mckissack

Supporting Risky Play in ECEC

Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Bachelor of Social Sciences

Degree Programme in Social Services

Bachelor's Thesis

03.11.2020

Author(s) Title	William Conner Mckissack Supporting Risky Play in Early Childhood Education
Number of Pages Date	29 pages + 2 appendices 3 November 2020
Degree	Bachelor of Social Sciences
Degree Programme	Social Services
Specialisation option	Early Childhood Education
Instructor(s)	Jukka Törnroos, Senior Lecturer Satu Hakanen, Senior Lecturer
<p>This thesis was completed with a private English language kindergarten in Helsinki, Finland. The group consisted of 27 children, their parents, and 5 staff members. The purpose of this thesis was to collect and share information with early childhood education professionals and their clients regarding the concept of risky physical play in early childhood education. I wanted to understand and compare ideas surrounding risky play from both the perspective of parents and professionals to develop a tool to help support children in risky play.</p> <p>I created an initial questionnaire about risky play and shared it with both the parents and professionals separately. After collecting their responses, I compared and discussed the results with the working life partner. Using feedback and existing research, I developed a tool for the staff to measure how often children engage in risky play and how that might relate to their growth and development.</p> <p>The assessment tool consists of categories of risky play and a rating scale for each of these. The assessments supplement each child's individual learning plan and give an idea of how often a child is willing to engage in risky play. The tool suggests physical activities and how risky play connects to other learning areas in early childhood education.</p> <p>This project brought up several interesting points regarding the value of risky play and some of the challenges risky play can create. Overall, the discussion was positive. Parents and professionals agreed on certain benefits of risky play as well as the need for observation from qualified, responsible individuals. The information and assessment tool will be used in the future for assessment and developing activities.</p>	
Keywords	risky play, physical play, zone of proximal development, early childhood education

Tekijä Otsikko	William Conner Mckissack Riskialttiiden leikkien tukeminen varhaiskasvatuksessa
Sivumäärä Aika	29 sivua + 2 liitettä 3 Marraskuu 2020
Tutkinto	Sosionomi AMK
Tutkinto-ohjelma	Sosiaalialan tutkinto-ohjelma
Suuntautumis-vaihtoehto	Varhaiskasvatus
Ohjaajat	Jukka Törnroos, Lehtori Satu Hakanen, Lehtori
<p>Tämä opinnäytetyö on suoritettu yksityisessä englanninkielisessä päiväkodissa Helsingissä, Suomessa. Ryhmä koostui 27:stä päiväkotilapsesta, heidän vanhemmistaan sekä viidestä päiväkodin henkilöstön jäsenestä. Tämän työn tarkoituksena oli kerätä ja jakaa tietoa riskileikin merkityksestä varhaiskasvatuksessa ammattilaisten ja lasten vanhempien kesken. Työssäni halusin ymmärtää ja vertailla riskileikkiin liittyviä ajatuksia sekä vanhempien, että ammattilaisten näkökulmasta ja käyttää tätä tietoa kehittääkseni työkalun tukemaan lapsia riskileikeissä.</p> <p>Tietoa riskileikkiin liittyen kerättiin kyselyllä, joka jaettiin sekä lasten vanhemmille että päiväkodin henkilöstölle. Kyselyn vastauksia vertailtiin ja käytiin läpi päiväkodin henkilöstön kanssa. Saatujen vastausten ja aiempien aiheesta tehtyjen tutkimusten perusteelle kehitettiin henkilöstölle työkalu, jonka avulla voidaan määrittää miten usein lapset osallistuvat riskileikkiin ja kuinka tämä mahdollisesti vaikuttaa heidän kasvuunsa ja kehitykseensä.</p> <p>Kehitettyssä arviointityökalussa riskileikki on jaettu eri kategorioihin ja näille on määritelty omat pisteytyksensä. Arviointityökalun tulokset täydentävät lapsen omaa oppimissuunnitelmaa ja antavat arvion kuinka usein lapsi on osallistunut riskileikkiin. Työkalun avulla voidaan arvioida miten fyysinen aktiviteetti ja riskileikki ovat yhteydessä muihin oppimisalueisiin lasten varhaiskasvatuksessa.</p> <p>Tässä työssä tuli esiin useita riskileikin hyötyjä, mutta samalla myös tähän liittyviä haasteita. Kaikkiaan riskileikkiin suhtauduttiin myönteisesti. Sekä vanhemmat että varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaiset näkivät riskileikin hyödyllisenä, mutta samalla tiedostivat riskileikkien vaativan vastuullisten aikuisten valvontaa. Opinnäytteessä koottuja tietoja sekä kehitettyä arviointityökalua tullaan käyttämään lasten toiminnan arvioinnissa ja kehityksessä.</p>	
Avainsanat	riskialtista leikkiä, fyysinen leikki, lähikehityksen vyöhyke, varhaiskasvatus

Contents

List of Abbreviations	5
1 Introduction	1
2 The Role of Play in Finnish ECEC	2
3 Recognizing Risky Play	5
3.1 Opportunity for Risky Play	5
3.2 Defining Risky Play	7
3.3 Concern surrounding risky play	9
3.4 Parental perceptions of risky play	11
3.5 Injury statistics	12
4 When play becomes risky play	13
4.1 The role of the professional	13
4.2 Zone of proximal development	14
4.3 Learning potential in risky play	16
4.3.1 Dynamic elements in the play environment	16
4.3.2 Support for thrill seeking	17
4.3.3 Safety within the learning environment	17
4.3.4 Professionals working together	18
5 Aims of the project	19
6 Developing a tool for support	20
6.1 Working life partner and target group	21
6.2 Surveying	22
6.3 Survey results	23
6.4 A tool for supporting risky play in ECEC	24
7 Discussion and Final Comments	25
Appendices	
Appendix 1. Supporting risky play questionnaire	
Appendix 2. A practical tool for supporting risky play in ECEC	

List of Abbreviations

ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care

FMEC – Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture

FNAE - Finnish National Agency for Education

FNC - Finnish National Core Curriculum fo Early Childhood Education and Care

ZPD - Zone of Proximal Development

1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis project is to take a closer look at the existing research and current perspectives surrounding the concept of risky play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments. The research offers important insights into the long-term value of supporting risky play in ECEC. It should also help establish a foundation for the development of a practical tool to guide professionals in ECEC for supporting risky play opportunities. The tool will help professionals recognize, assess, and further develop or support new types of physical play opportunities where children may choose to incorporate risk. Ideally, when applied correctly, the tool will give a clear picture of engagement levels in risky play and indicate any deficiencies. The tool will also include some adaptable suggestions for developing and promoting physical play activities in ECEC.

Supporting children in risky play opportunities can lead to more enriching outdoor play experiences, stronger connections to an active lifestyle, and increased independent mobility. This type of support can also yield psychological benefits such as better decision-making skills, increased coping skills, and increased overall well-being.

The motivation for this research comes from observations and personal experience as a professional (working with children in education) and a parent. In many modern societies, there is an increasing tendency to be aware of and sometimes avoid risk. Risk aversion may even be regarded as a positive or rewarding experience by some individuals but avoiding danger, or unnecessary risk, is not the same thing as avoiding risk altogether.

Increased risk aversion may be the indirect result of many factors in modern societies. For some families, the evolution of technology is a contributing factor while for others, urbanization and less natural outdoor space means less outdoor play. Some research suggests a heightened concern for safety may be the cause of a shift in how parents allow their children to play (Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.3136, Little, 2017, p.83-84). Many professionals working in ECEC have even suggested that systematic pressure from organizations providing care is partly to blame, due to increased safety regulations (Little, 2017, p.86-87). While understanding the impact of these various factors on risk aversion is helpful, it is even more important to address the developmental effect that removing risk from play may have on children.

With regard to children and their development, risk often implies negative outcomes and physical injury (Little, 2015, p.25), and while no parent wants to see a child injured or hurt, it is also unlikely that parents are intentionally avoiding normal development. Risk is often responsible for adding valuable learning to play scenarios in early childhood. Research suggests that encountering risk in play means dealing with variables, challenges, and stimulating factors that promote normal physical and mental development (S&L, 3447, p.259-259). Additionally, risk in play contributes positively to the development of a child's independent mobility and decision-making skills (Little, H., Wyver, S. and Gibson, F., 2011, p.115-116, Little, 2015, p.25-26).

In Finland, ECEC is the starting point for the Finnish Education system and highly regarded as an important stage in a child's growth and development (FNAE, 2018, p.8). The ECEC environment should be a safe space for children to take risks that promote learning and develop their own skill sets. Environments which support risk-taking in play offer children the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities and ultimately can empower them through the process of completing challenging tasks. Increased confidence and well-being may also encourage children to take a stronger interest in their own learning (Little, H., Wyver, S. and Gibson, F., 2011, p.116).

If opportunities for challenging physical play are decreasing and play opportunities in ECEC are so closely linked to the attitudes of parents and professionals, it is even more important to take a look at the ECEC environments and the suggested value of risk-taking play to better understand how parents and professionals can offer support to those children who choose to engage in risky play in ECEC.

2 The Role of Play in Finnish ECEC

In Finland, play is strongly considered as a working method for ECEC in which children are encouraged to participate, explore and solve problems both in groups and individually. Play also encourages creativity and often allows children to express themselves physically (FNAE, 2018, p. 38).

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (FNC) describes play as one of many key practices in ECEC. Play provides children opportunities to further the progress of their own learning and well-being. Experiences that stimulate each child's emotions, interest, or curiosity serve as their motivation to participate in play (FNAE, 2018, p.39). While play does also provide a great deal of joy for children, it is through play that children most often learn. In play, children are able to organize their thoughts regarding the world, and connect or establish meaning with regard to their surroundings (Kleppe, 2018, p.20).

ECEC Professionals in Finland are responsible for providing opportunity for play and supervision or guidance within the play on a regular basis. Many concerns from the current curriculum are connected to the concept of play: providing opportunity for participation, maintaining a safe environment, ensuring that the play is appropriate for skills and development, and closely observing the children during play (FNAE, 2018, p.39). Close observation allows personnel to effectively guide and plan future play opportunities, and when necessary, intervene.

Play often combines a child's natural enthusiasm with their own curiosity about the surrounding world. Often play stems from their personal abilities and offers them regular opportunities to challenge these abilities in a social environment which offers rich learning (FNAE, 2018, p.39). Finnish researcher Joonas Kangas suggests that play, or more specifically play-based learning, reinforces a variety of motor skills, social competence, and supports children in the development of self-regulation skills (Kangas, 2015, p. 848).

Kangas goes on to further point out that during play children are navigating between reality and imaginary scenarios and weighing choices and consequences simultaneously. These challenging scenarios provide a strong supporting mechanism for the development of a child's self-regulation skills (Kangas, 2015, p. 848). This is consistent with the NCC that describes play as a safe space for children to process experiences that they find difficult (FNAE, 2018, p. 39). Disappointment in life is inevitable. Understanding that choices are connected to outcomes and learning to evaluate those choices is an important lesson for children to learn. This is also an excellent introduction to coping strategies for many children.

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (FMEC) tells that children are both active agents in their own learning and are constantly learning when engaged in play. FMEC

goes on to state that good motor skills can bring joy and a sense of success, and that positive social relationships increase children's quality of life and protect them from social exclusion (FMEC, 2016, p.6). Through play we also allow children time and space to experiment and challenge their own skillsets. Children learn through experience and need the time and space in order to do so, and by trying children are able to better understand their current skillsets, limitations (FMEC, 2016, p.6).

Often during play, especially physical play, children naturally incorporate some type of risk. Through occasional scratches, bruises, and bumps that occur during play, children learn how to endure disappointment or misfortune. Here children are simultaneously learning about risk and safety. One of the most notable developmental benefits of risky play is the development of risk perception and management skills (Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.344).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the Finnish National Curriculum are quite clear in the view that children have the right to play and essentially should have a say, regardless of age and ability, in choosing the types of play they participate in (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1990, p.10, FNAE, 2018, p.39). For ECEC professionals in Finland, preparing to support children in as many different types of play as possible is a critical part of the process in order to offer a rich learning environment in ECEC settings. This means accepting a child's choice to play in a certain way and supporting that choice, even if it means incorporating risk.

Risky play is a bit newer within the Finnish ECEC context, but much of what is being discussed here in Finland regarding play in ECEC, stems from the Norwegian perspective. There is a great deal of cultural overlap when considering both nation's enthusiasm for outdoor and nature-based activities in ECEC and therefore fair to expect some similarities surrounding the concept of play. Norwegian researcher Rasmus Kleppe examines the natural aspects of play as well as risk-taking in play in early childhood. Kleppe suggests that play is the most natural activity children can participate in. Play incorporates so many different facets of children's development while simultaneously offering short-term solutions to their unending curiosity. When children are free to choose, they can and will play (Kleppe, 2018, p.20).

Kleppe also points out the unpredictability of play mirrors the unpredictability of life. If play is natural for children and their channel for learning about the world, then it must be

allowed in all forms (Kleppe, 2018, p.21). This is consistent with the Finnish National Curriculum, which describes play as a key practice of ECEC, which ultimately drives children's development, learning, and affects their well-being. Experiences which stimulate children's emotions, curiosity and interest inspire them to play. Through the playing process children are able to structure and explore the world around them, attach understanding and meaning to experiences and even create and maintain social relations. Through playing children are able to process experiences that seem otherwise difficult to comprehend either through language alone or mere observation (FNAE, 2018, p.39).

While much of Kleppe's research focuses on physical, risky play, the same pedagogical methods, concern for safety, and regard for mental, physical, and emotional well-being should be applied. As children attempt to make sense of the physical world that surrounds them and their own capabilities, professionals supervising play provide the support mechanism for this type of learning. This support can be physical or psychological and often becomes necessary when a child nears their own limitations. It is at that point when a professional is able to step in, offer support, and aid the child to further his/her learning (Kleppe, 2018, p.26-27).

During physical play, understanding the difference between danger and challenge becomes important. The curriculum is clear that professionals should neither discourage a child from learning through physical challenges (if the child is motivated to do so) or encourage playing in an unsafe manner (FMEC, 2016, p.20-22). In these scenarios observation is critical to the process and a key to supporting children in physical play as well as risky play.

3 Recognizing Risky Play

3.1 Opportunity for Risky Play

Defining risk can be challenging as it is an abstract concept and changes quickly from person to person. Kleppe's research suggests that risk is nothing more than a cultural construction that highlights the space between what is understood by a particular group to be a positive outcome, and that outcome's negative counterpart. The greater the gap, the greater the perception is of the existing risk. When it comes to children and raising

children it's almost universally desirable between parents and professionals that children are learning and preparing for the life ahead of them and doing so in a safe and healthy environment (Kleppe, 2018, p.14-18). The important questions in the context of this scenario are related to the acquisition of appropriate skills and abilities for each child's lifetime, what levels of risk children are exposed to while acquiring these skills and abilities, and whether or not that is an acceptable risk (Little, 2016, p.85).

Over the course of the past 15-20 years, academic literature and media sources have both generated many discussions which suggest opportunities for risky play are decreasing (Little, 2016, p.83-85). In the past, many of these opportunities have occurred during unstructured play in an outdoor setting. With the ever-increasing applications for tech-driven, indoor entertainment and learning, free play in an outdoor setting may be another category of play that is declining. This is something that would directly impact the limited number of risky play opportunities which today's children are experiencing (Sandseter, E.B.H. and Kennair, 2011, p.258-261).

Few individuals would debate that children today are growing up in a vastly different environment than that of their caretakers or parents, but it is not necessarily a negative thing to see new trends in behavior and learning if it is developmentally appropriate to meet the needs of those growing children's lives. What should be considered however, is whether or not the children of today still have a need for the positive developmental effects of risky play that previous generations have been exposed to, and if so, how can parents and professionals in ECEC work together to better support children engaging in these opportunities (Little, 2015, p.84-85, Sandseter E.B.H. and Kennair, 2011, p.258-259).

Tom Jambor, a researcher focusing on play and social development summarizes the need for risk-taking in play quite nicely stating that a huge part of children's play throughout the world is the search for thrills and excitement. A natural component of this process is risk-taking behavior which is an important part of each child's natural growth and development. To remove this would remove the consequential learning opportunities which children from previous generations have experienced. Removing risk-taking in play would also directly impact the way children challenge themselves physically and learn about safety (Jambor, 1995, p.3-5). Jambor is not the only one to suggest that understanding safety comes from engaging in risk (Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.344-345).

Jambor continues his argument by stating play opportunities function as ground zero for the development of decision-making skills and self-preservation. These should be considered equally important as any other learning opportunity (Jambor, 1995, p.3-5). Many professionals in ECEC would agree with this perspective and hope to create the rich environment that Jambor refers to on a daily basis. Many would also admit that providing these opportunities has become increasingly difficult (Little, 2017, p.93). Societies have become more urbanized, focused on indoor learning, and rely less on outdoor play as well as increasingly aware or sensitive to injury prevention (Little, 2015, p. 85). Many researchers have also described today's generation of children as bubble-wrapped or a "backseat generation" due to the increased focus on injury prevention that many modern parents exhibit (Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.345).

3.2 Defining Risky Play

For the sake of this project, a theoretical starting point should be established here to provide a basic definition of risky play in ECEC. Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter's definition and list of categories and subcategories will be appropriated to make clear as to what qualifies as risky play. Sandseter describes risky play as a set of motivated behaviors that provide a child with both an exhilarating positive emotion and expose the child to the stimuli they may have previously have feared (Sandseter E.B.H. and Kennair, 2011, p.258). It is important to understand from the beginning that no two children are alike in their perception of fear and therefore the resulting stimuli will not be exactly the same for any two children. For example, a thrilling height or an uncontrolled speed will not be the same for each child.

To further add context to the discussion surrounding risky play and the definition, the opportunities in this project will be focused on those which can be categorized as physical play. These often take place in outdoor settings (although some of the scenarios can potentially take place indoors.) It has also been suggested in many discussions that risk-taking in play comes in many forms and offers benefits beyond physical or motor skill development (Little, 2013, p.115), but for this project, the focal point will remain on physical play opportunities.

Sandseter divides and categorizes risky play into six different groups and goes on to subcategorize activities associated with each risk (Sandseter E.B.H. and Kennair, 2011, p.265). The categories listed below will serve as a framework for an assessment tool in

cooperation with the working life partner for supporting children's risky play. It has also been agreed on beforehand with the working life partner that less emphasis will be given to the categories with the headings dangerous tools and dangerous elements and more focus on the remaining four categories.

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of risky play

Categories	Risk	Subcategories
Great heights	Danger of injury from falling	Climbing Jumping from still or flexible surfaces Balancing on high objects Hanging/swinging at great heights
High Speed	Uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something (or someone)	Swinging at high speed Sliding and sledging at high speed Running uncontrollably at high speed Bicycling at high speed Skating and skiing at high speed
Dangerous tools	Can lead to injuries and wounds	Cutting tools: Knives, saws, axes Strangling tools: Ropes, etc.
Dangerous elements	Where children can fall into or from something	Cliffs Deep water or icy water Fire pits
Rough and tumble	Where the children can harm each other	Wrestling Fencing with sticks, etc. Play fighting
Disappear/get lost	Where the children can disappear from the supervision of adults, get lost alone	Go exploring alone Playing alone in unfamiliar environments

3.3 Concern surrounding risky play

There is a growing awareness that children have less opportunity for challenging playground experiences involving risk but providing opportunities in ECEC for thrilling and stimulating play is only possible when concerns or fear with regard to risky play is understood (Ball, D., Gill, T. and Spiegel, B., 2020, p.8). Concern or fear regarding risky play can originate from many sources and should be addressed. Personal experience, media sources, a heightened concern for a child's safety can all contribute to behavior that may limit opportunities for risky play (Little, 2017, p.115-116, Little, 2011, p.117).

Kleppe points out that the (concerning) thoughts themselves surrounding risk, are social constructions, and develop from interaction with the child's peers, parents, or professionals, and these can be significant (Kleppe, 2018, p.10-12). This is important to consider when working with children in ECEC as the type of guidance or support will impact the way challenging play is perceived.

It's also important to recognize that the motivation to deal with challenging situations later in life is developed from actually engaging in them at a young age. Risky play often has an antiphobic effect on those who engage in it (Little, 2011, p.127-129). This suggests the developmental benefits, which extend beyond early childhood, come from addressing these concerns and supporting children to engage in risky physical play at a young age.

If children themselves are natural thrill-seekers but can become demotivated to engage in risky play due to fear or uncertainty, a solution to balance this concern with the desire to participate must be found. It is important that the learning remains fun and safe simultaneously to motivate children as well as develop trust. Learning to manage risk does not mean eliminating it.

FNC also states that learning environments should promote learning which is healthy and safe and that physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions should always be taken into consideration (FNAE, 2018, p.38). In ECEC, the role of the adult is to support children who are both encountering feelings of doubt or fear as well as those showing no hesitation at all. This means also recognizing the difference between a child who completely lacks interest and one who shows interest coupled with fear or hesitation. The FNC outlines in the underlying values holistic learning, meaning that. learning is often a

combination of several factors: knowledge, skills, actions, emotions, perceptions, experiences, language and thinking. Balancing these can be a challenge but professionals need to be capable of this especially when supporting children in risky play (FNAE, 2018, p.20-21).

When children express fear or doubt with regard to play, professionals in ECEC are in a unique position to reaffirm or reject that belief. When supporting their risky endeavours, it is important to demonstrate the capacity for understanding hesitation while offering exciting new experiences. This is often the case with risky play and part of the attraction for the child. They are willing to incorporate risk to experience something new or satisfy their own curiosity and it is through these new experiences that children begin to strengthen their own skillsets and build resilience (Little, 2011, p.127-128). This is also something which is supported by the FNC. The curriculum points out that new experiences are a natural part of children's efforts to satisfy their own curiosity about the world they live in and professionals should be willing and able to support them in this matter (FNAE, 2018, p.20).

A practical example of this would be when a child climbs onto a large rock and announces that it is too high to jump down or that they are not yet willing to do so. Professionals have the opportunity to agree or disagree with this, but the reasoning should be clear. To say that the choice not to jump is the correct one, can reaffirm the child's belief in the existing fear, and suggest that the potential negative results outweigh the positive ones. Maybe the rock is too high and potential for injury exists, in which case the fear is justified. However, to disagree, or suggest that the fear is a temporary thought, or even a result of inexperience, can encourage the child to try something new and be open to the idea that the potential positive results outweigh the negative ones (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.). Often, a more experienced peer will demonstrate this naturally during the play. There is usually inconsistency between what any two individuals regard as risky \ as well as how much consideration for safety each risky opportunity should be given. This is something professionals should explore through observation and communication with children.

3.4 Parental perceptions of risky play

Helen Little's interest in the perceptions of risk in play amongst adults or caretakers motivated her to organize repeated semi-structured interviews with parents of children attending daycare in Sydney, Australia. The discussions took place primarily with mothers and revealed that many of them, are well informed regarding the benefits of risky play. The recorded interviews reveal several consistently positive perspectives that may match the language and safety concerns of many parents as well as the pedagogical wishes of many professionals. These should be considered when asking about the value of risky play experiences.

Learning to deal with anxiety was one of the most common outcomes which was mentioned. The mothers agreed about the positive contributions to their children's mental and emotional well-being when engaging in risky play. They believed the risk-taking contributes to the construction of each child's confidence and self-esteem, which in turn leads to higher levels of resilience, which can be further applied to the next set of challenges. Without these experiences, children cannot be expected to deal with future disappointment or failures independently or in a very positive manner (Little, 2015, p. 30).

Another meaningful perspective was that risk cannot be completely avoided and that every aspect of learning involves some risk. Beyond rock-climbing or mountain biking, risk is always evident in children's learning. Risk exists in learning language, making friends, navigating new or unfamiliar spaces. All these have potential for undesirable outcomes therefore, some elements of risk. Recognizing that certain choices should not be repeated is an important feature of experiential learning, and not something to be avoided (Little, 2015, p. 30).

Self-regulated behavior was also mentioned as an important benefit. Several mother's suggested that learning to assess levels of fear and anxiety is a very important step towards managing one's own behavior. Feelings of fear and anxiety are not necessarily negative, but rather informative and important when dealing with challenges in life. Self-regulated behavior in the simplest terms is having sufficient control over one's emotions so that impulses and desires can be managed in a way that is understood to be socially acceptable. Without self-regulation, emotions potentially dictate behavior beyond an individual's control (Little, 2015, p. 30).

Safety was also mentioned in the interviews. The mothers spoke about the ability to manage risks and understand hazards as something that can only develop from risk-taking in play. Without defining or understanding risk, understanding safety or identifying hazards would be very challenging. By addressing their own curiosity about fear and risk are children able to understand what their own limitations are with regard to safety within play (Little, 2015, p. 30).

3.5 Injury statistics

Supporting children who engage in risky play does not come without risks itself. If risky play only increased motor skills, bolstered coping mechanisms, and prepared children to address the uncertainty of their own futures there would be virtually no opposition at all. The possibility for injury does exist but it's debatable how well the injury statistics are connected to the risk.

Injuries occur and are a part of many children's realities. How often these injuries are directly connected to risky play opportunities versus poor judgement is something that is up for discussion. Whether or not a serious injury is a possibility for the average child, or how often a serious injury can occur during routinely risky play, is something else that cannot be easily forecasted (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.259-260).

Sandseter & Lennair's research reveals the possibility that chances of serious injury are less common than many of us realize. Playground accident statistics from many countries confirm that the majority of injuries are limited to bumps, bruises, concussions and fractures or broken bones. These are injuries which are quite common and do not disrupt daily life or development to any serious degree. These same injuries can also result from very ordinary accidents (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.259-260).

Injuries causing permanent damage or resulting in fatality do occur, but they are very rare. The research surrounding playground injuries also suggests that accidents are rarely responsible for lasting trauma or mental disturbance that would affect a child's normal development. There is also no guarantee that these same incidents can be avoided simply by avoiding risky physical play scenarios (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.259-260). Several other researchers have argued similar points and even go on to say that bubble-wrapping childhood is not the solution for preventing playground injuries, but rather the concern should be promoting healthy risk-taking with children (Brussoni, M.,

Brunelle, S., Pike, I., Sandseter, E.B.H., Herrington, S., Turner, H., Belair, S., Logan, L., Fuselli, P. & Ball, D.J., 2015, p.344-347, Jambor, 1995, p.6-7.)

In the scenarios where injuries do occur, Sandseter & Lennair suggest that the accidents are more connected to the individual's judgement than the equipment or environment. There are many variables that can affect a child's assessment and judgement in these situations. Sandseter & Lennair suggest some children are more accident prone and can be identified as high-risk takers. They not only injure themselves more often but also make up a larger percentage of the statistics of playground accidents. These (high-risk) children often have certain combinations of personality traits that make this more likely, such as extraversion and low inhibitory control. As a result, they overestimate their physical capabilities and do not hesitate to take risks during play (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.259-260). Jambor suggests social pressure from peers or adults as a possible reason for serious injury. He goes on to say that spaces with a natural shortage of challenges often bore children and this scenario encourages children to create their own challenges and take unnecessary risks or misuse equipment (Jambor, 1995, p.1). This is still strongly connected to an individual's judgment.

A stronger connection also exists between the seriousness of the injuries and a child's willingness to take risks than risks in play. While the play itself is challenging, this again suggests that a more meaningful connection between the injuries and the risk taker exists as a result of poor decision-making (Matheny, 1997, p. 45–60). This is another reason to support children in these risky play scenarios.

4 When play becomes risky play

4.1 The role of the professional

Support from professionals has a large impact on risky play opportunities. Inexperienced children rely regularly on experience and judgement from adults in ECEC and risky play should be no exception. Often support comes in the form of assessing or problem-solving challenges but in many cases, it simply means trusting and allowing children to try.

In Finland, the FMEC describes in the National Curriculum the roles of the professionals when supporting children in play: the personnel has the duty to support preconditions for play, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to participate according to his/her skills

and capabilities. Professionals support children in play with pedagogical planning and either guide the play from the outside with instructions, directions, suggestions or from the inside by physically joining the play (FNAE, 2018, p.39).

This is important to consider as professionals will often plan an activity or a game and as children are playing, they instinctively alter the game and introduce new elements. Typically, this occurs when a child wants to challenge him/herself further. Introducing new elements also can mean introducing a certain amount of uncertainty or risk. The Ministry of Education and Culture has echoed this thought and declared that adults should create a safe atmosphere but remain willing to give space for children to explore and experiment physically (FMEC, 2016, p.32). As games and play evolves, it's important to periodically reassess the play in order to maintain balance between safety and challenge.

Easy examples could be movement games that children want to speed up or balancing exercises that they want to mix with movement or try from a higher point. FMEC also describes a certain amount of flexibility that should be present in the learning environment as play or games can occur virtually anywhere (FMEC, 2016, p.23-24). This also suggest that as play evolves, professionals should allow for that evolution as it echoes the children's interests and be prepared to support the newer version of the play. In this context, supporting risky play can simply mean, allowing this evolution to occur and trusting the participants to make proper choices regarding risk.

4.2 Zone of proximal development

Lev Vygotsky, a soviet psychologist best known for his work with children's development, introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD describes the gap between what a child can do independently and what the same child can do with the help of a more experienced or skilled individual (Wass, R. & Golding, C., 2014, p.671).

Vygotsky argued that intellectual activity is a result of social and cultural influence and that children's learning isn't solely dependent on existing knowledge or the child's own existing capacity. Vygotsky's theories also included the idea that good learning happens ahead of a child's own development. Here a link can be established between the learning described by Vygotsky and engaging in behavior with potentially unknown outcomes and this is what risky play can look like (Beckett, C. and Taylor, H., 2013, p. 79-84). Each

child's natural propensity to seek thrills or take risks can motivate them to try something beyond their own capacity. Vygotsky's ZPD theory also describes in many cases the type of exploratory learning that children are often best known for and why we so often use the ZPD in education. Children learn a great deal from exposure to other more experienced individuals (Wass, R. & Golding, C., 2014, p.671).

Vygotsky argued that development was more biological than learning, which he described as mental or conscious activity happening in the brain, and therefore considered this new learning zone or zone of proximal development, to be a space for learning that which is just beyond a child's current capacity for knowledge or capabilities (Beckett, C. and Taylor, H., 2013, p.79-84).

Kleppe notes in his own research that Vygotsky's theory shows us children's behavior can be interpreted as a set of natural prompts for educators. This is the perspective he has also taken when considering risky play behavior in ECEC. Kleppe goes on to explain that ZPD provides observable criteria for effectively learning and planning pedagogical activities. Professionals or even parents can determine the actual level of development simply through observation, but learning is more of a collaborative process between the learner and a more experienced peer or adult. This back and forth interaction occurs in the ZPD and represents a learner's potential or skills and behavior that is just beyond their current capacity. Kleppe suggests that in supporting risky play this is where the professionals will focus a great deal of their efforts (Kleppe, 2018, p.27).

Kleppe offers the example of asking a child to perform a task that is well within their ability. This offers little in the way of learning when it is a skill they have already developed and no additional criteria or challenge has been added. Typically, they will become bored and stop. Asking the same child to perform a task that is too difficult or well beyond their ability will also offer little in the way of learning. Once they recognize the difficulty they will have little interest in even trying. Offering the child a chance to perform the task with a new or additional challenge will create positive learning. It considers the initial skillset while offering a new skill beyond the child's own level of development (Kleppe, 2018, p.27).

We see the ZPD constantly in ECEC environments: key ideas become a conversation or a game where children engage in rich discussion or play surrounding those topics. When the skills or capacity of a child are exhausted a professional or more experienced

peer offers something new to support their learning. As the children's learning or understanding develops the ideas evolve or shift, as well as the roles of those in the learning environment. This ZPD would later become known in many educational discussions as scaffolding which describes this process of building on existing knowledge. (Wass, R. & Golding, C., 2014, p.677-679).

4.3 Learning potential in risky play

One aspect of this project is to shift the discussion surrounding risky play in a more positive direction by focusing more on some of the benefits. For parents and professionals, it is important to consider the learning potential for risky play rather than only focusing on the potential for injury. Sandseter & Leinair, Little, and Jambor share the perspective that risky play comes with benefits when certain conditions are met in the play environment. (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.274-275, Little, 2015, p. 24, Jambor, 1995, p.6-7).

Jambor describes play as the testing ground for the development of decision-making skills and goes on to say that the social implications and values that motivate us when making these decisions are often based on risk. To remove play altogether would be unthinkable as this would remove the possibility for children to test their own ideas about the world. The same consideration should be given to the idea of removing risk. As we shift towards more risk-averse lifestyles or regulated environments it should be understood which benefits from these types of learning experiences are being removed from the lives of children (Jambor, 1995, p.3-4).

4.3.1 Dynamic elements in the play environment

Traditional playgrounds are under some criticism when compared to natural spaces with regard to how much opportunity for risky or thrilling outdoor play is available. Playgrounds are developed with regulatory standards designed to ensure safety. As a result, several researchers have suggested that children are more motivated to misuse playground equipment when it doesn't offer developmentally appropriate challenges. The standardized pieces of equipment often lack the dynamic elements that can be found in natural spaces (Jambor, 1995, p.3, Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.3138-3139).

When dynamic elements are included in the play area it is characteristically evolving constantly and offering uncertainty. As children move through the play environment spaces, gaps, paths are constantly irregular. Obstacles exist to slow down, speed up, or interrupt our movement (hills, ditches, gaps for jumping, etc.) Uneven surfaces or gaps in the terrain invite children to jump distances that may or may not have been previously calculated and exercise balance and strength abruptly. Spaces like these can increase motor function and challenge the mind simultaneously (Little, H., Wyver, S. and Gibson, F., 2011, p. 116, 127-129, Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.3138-3141). Children who play in these spaces regularly can be expected to understand the challenge of regularly adapting to a constantly evolving set of challenges. Based on this description, outdoor play environments are excellent places for supporting risky play.

4.3.2 Support for thrill seeking

Children engaging in risky play are often looking for thrilling forms of stimulation and answers to their own curiosity. This is the most natural method for when discovering their own physical capabilities. Sometimes support means allowing space and time for exploration. In risky play, children need space to indulge their own curiosities regarding their physical skills and while this is a constant challenge for caretakers and professionals it is critical to understand the value and need for these opportunities in the same way that we understand the safety and wellbeing of children (Little, H., Wyver, S. and Gibson, F., 2011, p.117).

There is large difference between unsupervised or dangerous play opportunities when compared to allowing children the freedom to explore and incorporate risk into their outdoor play. This experience results in positive learning, increased confidence, and gives each child so much information regarding his/her physical strengths and weaknesses (Jambor, 1995, p.3-5).

4.3.3 Safety within the learning environment

The FNC tells that children should have the opportunity to explore the world with their entire bodies. Often this is done through physical play. The curriculum also describes a safe environment for playing as a prerequisite and responsibility of ECEC staff. A safe environment, free of unnecessary danger is always the starting point.

The potential for serious or long-term injury should be reduced to the point of acceptable or contained risk. This is to say that healthy risk-taking is allowed in an otherwise safe environment, through challenging physical play (Jambor, 1995, p.8). While the number of overly willing risk-takers makes up a small portion of the population is good to be aware of the possibility of injury as this is also a high percentage of the documented playground injuries (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.259). Even though the percentage is small, some of these documented injuries are quite serious. Understanding that when these children exhibit signs of low inhibitory control it is exactly in these circumstances where positive intervention is needed to maintain a safe environment (Matheny, 1987, p.45-60). It is also the opportunity to teach them how to properly evaluate a risky situation and promote better decision-making skills.

4.3.4 Professionals working together

Professionals in ECEC should agree as to what qualifies as risky play opportunities and what steps are worth taking in order to promote healthy risk-taking and better decision making with the children. Some opportunities will be best suited for unorganized play and the children's own decision-making process while other opportunities will require more organized guidance from adults. It is important for professionals to agree as to which opportunities are which. Communication between children and professionals should be consistent when promoting risky play is being considered.

Sandseter & Lennair revealed that in interviews with staff members from 2 Norwegian ECEC facilities that it was agreed upon that children also mirrored the perceived danger in the play environment in the same way as the staff did. This suggests that if a staff member feels uncomfortable with the idea of jumping from a rock, children may be less willing to try regardless of their own personal motivation or any potential benefits that come from accomplishing the task (Sandseter & Lennair, 2011, p.264).

Similarly, the research suggested that professionals, parents, and even peers play a role in reinforcing a child's fears or reducing them. For professionals promoting risky play, the goal should be to help the children to understand when risks are too great as well as support and assess when they are motivated to take on challenging tasks.

5 Aims of the project

The overall aim of this project is to shift the discussion and thinking around the topic of risky play into a more positive light, within the context of early childhood education and care. This will be done by applying current research surrounding the topic to develop an assessment tool to guide professionals in supporting risky play. The tool includes the following: background information describing the potential value of risky play, a tool for gauging an individual child's desire to engage in risky play, and an opportunity chart or list of potential activities which might help a professional looking to offer more support to children engaging in risky play.

Often discussions surrounding this topic focus on the outcomes of negative decisions and poor choices rather than the learning potential or physical benefits of risk-taking in play. The Finnish National Curriculum puts a heavy emphasis on experiential learning within play as well as physical or outdoor play. The curriculum tells us that these are both natural components of childhood allowing children to make meaningful connections with the surrounding world through exploration (FNAE, 2018, p.39, 46-47). Children enjoy a great deal of physical, emotional, and social learning benefits from play. Professionals and parents need to be prepared to support their choices even when they engage in play that may include certain levels of risk.

The first part of the project involves organizing current research surrounding the topic of risky play in ECEC into this writing. This is used to create a theoretical framework and explain why it is important to support children in risky play. Linking the research to the Finnish National Curriculum will give a good basis as to why professionals should be considering this topic carefully in Finland. A shortened version of the theories explaining the value of supporting children in risky play will be included in the tool, which is being created in collaboration with the working life partner.

The second part of this product, will be an assessment tool, primarily developed for guiding professionals to evaluate and determine how often a child engages in risky play and to what degree. This will be useful in developing individual learning plans and setting goals for each child. The tool may also provide a platform for discussing the child's development with the parents and how physical play is related to the child's development. The tool may also suggest where there are shortages for risky play as well as challenging outdoor play in the kindergarten unit's curriculum.

The third part of this collaboration will be an opportunity chart or short list of suggested activities to be developed for physical play. The activities will be flexible in order to allow opportunity for children to explore and play in different ways. These opportunities will ideally offer the professionals a chance to plan, observe, and increase support for children who choose to take risks within physical play.

A better understanding of these concepts will aid both professionals and parents in supporting children in risky play by combining their natural thrill-seeking with pedagogical measures: harnessing the motivation for learning, guiding with less authority, and observing the natural evolution that goes hand in hand with the child's freedom and right to play. The tool may also assist professionals in developing curricula that focuses on richer, more dynamic play, where children simultaneously feel safety and ease alongside challenge and learning.

6 Developing a tool for support

Using theory along with feedback from parents and professionals a practical tool can be developed which professionals can use to support risky play in ECEC. This means in many cases working to simply increase participation in outdoor or physical activities. Planning risky activities is neither the idea or necessary to support children in risky play. Children often take their own creative license within organized activities and introduce risk to the scenario quite naturally. When this happens, it's critical that professionals understand how to respond to this shift. The role of the professional becomes supporting those children who are eager to challenge themselves by introducing risk to the play and this can either be in the form of encouragement or intervention depending on the child.

Balancing the need for safety with the enthusiasm and desires of each child is a key part of the learning process. Understanding where and when the ZPD can be a method for support is another meaningful part of the process. Finally, professionals need a clear understanding as to why risky play should be allowed and what value it can potentially offer and this is what the tool will offer.

In some cases, the tool may identify overly willing risk-takers and can be used to develop activities to strengthen decision making skills and risk management. In other cases, it

may identify risk aversion and suggest different types of physical play that could be supportive for those particular children.

6.1 Working life partner and target group

The working-life partner for this project is a private English language kindergarten in the Kallio neighborhood of Helsinki. The kindergarten unit offers daycare and preschool services in accordance with the FNC and City of Helsinki's ECEC Curriculum. Currently there are 12 families with children using the daycare service who have agreed to participate in a short survey as well as some semi-structured discussions related to the thesis project. The children in the kindergarten are divided into two groups based on age, but regularly play together during their free play and outdoor time. The unit is located in a very urban setting but there are quite a few parks within walking distance so there is already a variety of opportunities for physical outdoor play. There is also a small yard adjacent to the building where the children play at least once a day. The current staff tries to organize trips to larger parks two times per week.

There are three staff members working with the unit. Two of them are full-time teachers and one is the manager who is also responsible for two other units within the same company. The lead kindergarten teacher will be the main contact for the project. The kindergarten's current curriculum has been made in accordance with the FNC and lists the following five learning areas as focal points on the company website: modes of self-expression, rich language development, me and my community, exploring and experimenting in the local environment, and growth and development. The manager and business owner have asked that the name of the kindergarten be kept confidential as well as the names of any staff member or any of the clients.

Initial discussions with management and teachers revealed that there was a great deal of interest in the subject matter of risky play as well as developing a better understanding of learning opportunities which utilize physical play. This collaboration will explore the topic of risky play and the discussion within the kindergarten community. Selected research from this paper will be used to develop an introduction to the tool answering some basic questions about the potential benefits and hazards of risky play. From there a simple form for measuring the children's engagement in risky physical play will be organized and finally, an opportunity chart or list of opportunities to promote physical activity will be added. Upon completion, the tool and the thesis itself, will be presented to the working-

life partner for review, feedback, and implementation. Periodic discussions will be organized throughout the project to review theory and feedback from parents and professionals.

6.2 Surveying

While this project does not include a traditional data analysis a short questionnaire was designed to gauge how familiar staff and families were with the topic and how they felt in general about risky play as a learning opportunity. The questionnaire was distributed to families and staff members separately so that the answers could be compared but remain anonymous. A copy of the questionnaire is attached in the appendix.

Surveying the families was also a request from the management as a component of the service is built on the concept that the children have access to a safe learning environment and opportunities to play and are not being exposed regularly to any unnecessary stress. The topic itself can imply potentially negative behavior to those who aren't familiar with the subject so this felt like a meaningful step. This also gave the families and staff a chance to voice their concerns related to the project and build a constructive dialogue around the topic.

The assumption prior to the feedback was answers from the family would focus more on safety and well-being and answers from the staff would focus more on learning opportunities such as motor skill development and dealing with disappointment. While the perspective of a parent or caretaker is not the only determining factor in planning pedagogical activities, it is worth considering as many parents may feel differently about what constitutes risk and furthermore, how meaningful exposure to risk is to themselves and their children at different stages of development. The opportunity to address considerations for safety was also important at this stage to create a feeling of trust between staff members and parents.

The concept of risky play or intentionally allowing children to assess and take risks in play was somewhat new to many individuals who came into contact with this project including the staff. Little's research suggests, there can easily be inconsistency between staff members as to what qualifies as risky, too challenging, not stimulating enough, etc.

as these are somewhat abstract concepts often connected to an individual's own perceptions (Little, 2015, p.87). In an effort to clarify these ideas, the survey was used as a starting point for sharing and questioning the research amongst the group.

6.3 Survey results

The questionnaire was created for both the families and staff members to share their perspectives. Without the feedback, it's unclear how often professionals are focusing on the wishes of the parents or how much parents understand the pedagogical process or wishes of the staff. With the feedback, a link can be established between the commonalities and comparisons can be drawn to the responses which differ. It also made the creation of a practical tool much more comfortable. Several common responses were consistent with the current research surrounding the topic and those have been summarized in the following paragraphs.

Nearly every respondent identified risk as the possibility for learning or expanding one's skills. This suggested a relatively positive connection to the word. Only 25% of the respondents from the parent group identified risk as the possibility for injury, danger or physical risk. Both groups, parents and staff members, identified increasing coordination, strength, and awareness of one's own limitations as important learning goals. Many of them cited examples of risk as challenging physical tasks such as climbing walls and trees.

Each parent who responded suggested that in some way risk is an inherent part of life and acknowledging and preparing to deal with risk is an important part of a child's upbringing. One parent responded with the statement "every play includes risks and it is important that we would acknowledge these and prepare." This is similar to existing research regarding parental views of risk in play (Little, 2013, p.28-34).

Over half of the parent group agreed that there is a stronger concern for children's well-being and safety when compared to their own childhood or those of previous generation's and roughly 75% of the parents suggested that this is a result of living a more urbanized lifestyle. When asked about the risky spaces in relation to the kindergarten nearly every parent mentioned traffic or crossing the street as a main concern.

It was also suggested by three respondents from the parent group that the increased exchange of information has increased our awareness of factors related to the well-being of children. This creates additional caution and consideration with regard to risk which is not necessarily the same as aversion.

The most interesting responses came when asked about the possibility of increasing exposure to risky scenarios in play. Roughly 75% of the parents responded by saying that children (under proper adult supervision) would benefit from being exposed to more risk-taking scenarios in play.

100% of the staff respondents agreed that in organized activities, allowing risk-taking would be beneficial. The staff responses also suggested that understanding choices and corresponding consequences was very important. The staff responses also suggested that many of the children would benefit from more physical activity and motor skill development.

Both groups consistently mentioned the value of supervision and acknowledging the possibility of risk in a scenario beforehand. Both groups recognized the need for support or what has been described in the research as the zone of proximal development. Both groups also acknowledged that risky play offers exciting elements and thrilling activities for the children.

6.4 A tool for supporting risky play in ECEC

Each child's engagement can be measured using the different categories of risky play. Children are assessed through regular observation and dialogue. The assessment should identify areas of concern in risky play or potentially deficiencies in physical play. The tool may also be useful for identifying those children who are overly willing to take risks or constantly engaged in risky play. These children may benefit from support to strengthen their assessment and decision-making skills. As multiple staff members use the tool to make assessments the outcomes may also reveal an individual staff member's perception with regard to risky play. In each case, the results will serve as a starting point for developing richer learning using physical play.

The second application of the tool comes in the planning phase. Harvesting ideas from a child's interest, ECEC facility's resources and taking into consideration the parents'

concerns, activities can be planned to promote participation in physical play and healthy risk-taking. The assessment should give a good idea of what activities need developing and where the child is already comfortable. Using the areas where the child is comfortable as a starting point, more challenging activities can be integrated into the planning. The activities should routinely offer new learning opportunities based on the child's current skillsets.

Offering opportunities (primarily in an outdoor environment) to take risks in physical play and offering support by using the ZPD is essential for this process to create positive learning (Kleppe, 2018, p.91-94). Professionals are limited only by the ideas and resources that come up during the planning phases. Children can also be an excellent resource for designing games and activities that offer these opportunities. Repeated opportunities with escalating difficulty should be considered in cases when challenges are completed with ease or immediate success. Professionals should also be prepared to discuss failure with the children and open to the idea that finding the appropriate amount of support is an ongoing process (Kleppe, 2018, p.94-96).

The final stage when using the tool would be some type of reassessment. In discussions with the working life partner, it was suggested that assessments could be made in the autumn and springtime to correspond with the timeline for developmental discussions. This also gives a reasonable amount of time to the child as well as the professional making the observations between assessments. The assumption is that, for most children, the assessments will offer very different results when made roughly six months apart. It is also during this time that new activities can be developed based on the child's interest and strengths. A copy of the tool being presented to the working life partner can be found in the appendix.

7 Discussion and Final Comments

In this project I collected and organized some of the current research surrounding the topic of risky play in ECEC. Discussions regarding risky play in ECEC are quite new in the Finnish context but have been ongoing for several years already in Norway, Australia, United Kingdom and the United States. For this reason, when organizing the research for the working life partner, I attempted to connect concepts regarding risky play to Finnish research surrounding the topic of play as well as the Finnish National Curriculum and guidelines for ECEC.

The central questions behind the project came from the working life partner: what is the value of risky play and how do we identify and support children who choose to engage in risk taking during play in our daily routines? Through surveys and short interviews or discussion with staff members it became apparent that in many circumstances risk taking in play was seen as beneficial even though it has the potential for negative outcomes. In the discussion, outcomes were regarded as a necessary part of the learning process and an important aspect of life that children should be exposed to.

Initial research suggested that unstructured outdoor play has a strong connection to risky play and that opportunities for outdoor play for many children are declining (Brussoni, M., Brunelle, S., Pike, I., Sandseter, E.B.H., Herrington, S., Turner, H., Belair, S., Logan, L., Fuselli, P. & Ball, D.J., 2015, p.344-345, Little, 2015, p.83-87). Possible reasons for this include urbanization, increased regulatory environments, and an increasing emphasis on media literacy and technology which promotes many new forms of indoor entertainment and learning. This has a profound impact on how we raise our children and the way they play in their learning environments as well as what they choose in their own free time. Play researchers agree that there is a need to recognize this and develop a stronger awareness of the learning benefits that are potentially removed from the lives of children when they do not engage in exhilarating physical play (Jambor, 1995, p.6-8, FMEC, 2016, p.8-16).

Research from Finland and other parts of the world suggests that that children have an inborn need to lead a physically active lifestyle filled with opportunities for challenging outdoor play (which often leads to risky play) and contributes positively to the health, well-being, and physical development of children both during and far beyond ECEC (Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D., 2012, p.3137, FMEC, 2016, p.32). The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture also suggests that good motor skills bring children a sense of joy and success as well as allow them to easily engage in physical activity that may have social benefits. This can often help children to avoid social exclusion later in life (FMEC, 2016, p.6-8).

With so much positive learning potential it may be a bit curious as to why more parents and professionals working with children in ECEC aren't organizing more opportunities for challenging physical play on a regular basis. The two major concerns which were found in discussions with the working life partner as well as the families of the kindergarten were safety and supervision. Responses consistently revealed that allowing children

opportunities to engage in risky play would ultimately be a positive thing if they created some type of positive learning and unnecessary risks can be avoided. The other common response was that children need to be observed closely and staff should have a consistent understanding about what type of challenges qualify as healthy risk-taking during these types of play opportunities.

Professionals are also strongly encouraged in Finland to offer or allow children the space and time to explore their own skillsets as well as challenging physical scenarios during outdoor play. This is an important part the experiential learning process that exists in play (FNAE, 2018, p. 38). This is valued highly in Finland and should be taken seriously even when children choose to incorporate elements of risk into their play.

Taking these viewpoints into consideration, I have developed a working tool that can be used for identifying and supporting children who choose to engage in risky play. The tool is designed for professionals who are developing pedagogical goals as part of each child's individual learning plan in ECEC. I chose to include some basic information regarding the value of risky play as well as a list of suggested activities so that professionals as well as parents would have a clearer understanding of the process. It was also agreed upon with the working life partner that positive learning often occurs when children are receiving similar support in the ECEC environment and the home and this is something I wanted to promote through this project.

While the project could be described as successful at this point, it's important to note that this really is a starting point. Many questions have come up during the process that require more research and I would encourage any professional using the tool, after some experience with it, to reevaluate the method and consider alternate applications. Risky play offers many potential benefits in ECEC and for the sake of children's holistic well-being, professionals should explore more options for balancing safety concerns with the desire for thrilling or challenging physical play.

References

- Ball, D., Gill, T. and Spiegel, B., 2020. Managing Risk In Play Provision. [online] Playengland.net. Available at: <<http://www.playengland.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/managing-risk-in-play-provision.pdf>> [Accessed 4 September 2020].
- Beckett, C. and Taylor, H., 2013. Human Growth And Development. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.
- Brussoni, M., Brunelle, S., Pike, I., Sandseter, E.B.H., Herrington, S., Turner, H., Belair, S., Logan, L., Fuselli, P. & Ball, D.J. 2015, "Can child injury prevention include healthy risk promotion?", *Injury Prevention*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 344.
- Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D. 2012. Risky Play and Children's Safety: Balancing Priorities for Optimal Child Development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 9(9), pp. 3134-48. doi:10.3390/ijerph9093134
- Daniels, H., 2005. An Introduction to Vygotsky. Hove: Routledge.
- Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018. National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2018. Helsinki: Finnish National Agency for Education.
- Guldberg, H. (2009). Reclaiming Childhood. London: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203870419>
- Jambor, T. (1995). Coordinating the Elusive Playground Triad: Managing Children's Risk-Taking Behavior, (While) Facilitating Optimal Challenge Opportunities, (within) a Safe Environment. [online] ERIC. Available at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED405132> [Accessed 26 Feb. 2020].
- Kangas, J., Ojala, M., Venninen, T. (2015) Children's Self- Regulation in the Context of Participatory Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education, Early Education and Development, 26:5-6, 847-870, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2015.1039434
- Kleppe, R., 2018. One-To-Three-Year-Olds' Risky Play In Early Childhood Education And Care. Ph. D in Educational Sciences for Teacher Education. Oslo Metropolitan University.
- Lehto, S, Reunamo, J & Ruismäki, H 2012, 'Children's Peer Relations and Children's Physical Activity', *Procedia : Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vuosikerta 45, Sivut 277-283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.564>
- Little, H. (2017). Promoting risk-taking and physically challenging play in Australian early childhood settings in a changing regulatory environment. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 15(1), pp.83–98.

Little, H. (2015). Mothers' beliefs about risk and risk-taking in children's outdoor play. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 15(1), pp.24–39.

Little, H., Wyver, S. and Gibson, F. (2011). The influence of play context and adult attitudes on young children's physical risk-taking during outdoor play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19(1), pp.113–131.

Matheny, A.P. (1987). Psychological Characteristics of Childhood Accidents. *Journal of Social Issues*, 43(2), pp.45–60.

Michelle Liu, Grace Goc Karp & Debby Davis (2010) Teaching Learning–Related Social Skills in Kindergarten Physical Education, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 81:6, 38-44, DOI: 10.1080/07303084.2010.10598490

Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland. 2016. Joy, Play And Doing Together Recommendations For Physical Activity In Early Childhood. [online] Available at: <<https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/78924/OKM35.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>> [Accessed 25 October 2020].

Nagel, M., 2019. Boys: Understanding Rough And Tumble Play | First Five Years. [online] [Firstfiveyears.org.au](https://www.firstfiveyears.org.au). Available at: <<https://www.firstfiveyears.org.au/child-development/boys-understanding-rough-and-tumble-play>> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

Pound, L. and Hughes, C. (2005) *How Children Learn: From Montessori to Vygotsky - Educational Theories and Approaches Made Easy*. Crystal House: Andrews UK Ltd.

“Risk.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/risk>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2020.

Sandseter, E.B.H. and Kennair, L.E.O. (2011). Children's Risky Play from an Evolutionary Perspective: The Anti-Phobic Effects of Thrilling Experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 9(2), p.147470491100900.

Sandseter, E.B.H. (2014) Early childhood education and care: practitioners' perceptions of children's risky play; examining the influence of personality and gender, *Early Child Development and Care*, 184:3, 434-449, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2013.794797

UN Commission on Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child., 7 March 1990, E/CN.4/RES/1990/74, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f03d30.html> [accessed 26 October 2020]

Upbringing (2020) Risky play at the park + bored kid in the freedom to play [Podcast]. 9 March 2020. Available at <https://share.transistor.fm/s/b4587da7> (Accessed: 29 April 2020).

Wass, R. & Golding, C. (2014) Sharpening a tool for teaching: the zone of proximal development, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19:6, 671-684, DOI:10.1080/13562517.2014.901958

Supporting risky play questionnaire

This questionnaire was created in order to collect some opinions regarding risk-taking or risky behavior in outdoor or physical play and what type of impact it may or may not have on a child's learning and/or development in Early Childhood Education and Care.

The tool and questionnaire are being developed in conjunction with the research for my Thesis project, for a Bachelor of Social Services in Helsinki Metropolia AMK. I welcome any feedback or new ideas you are able and willing to offer and as a result am happy to share a shortened version of my own findings upon completion of this project.

No personal information is necessary or will be shared during the course of this work but should you have any questions, I am more than happy to answer them via email: Conner.Mckissack(at)metropolia.fi. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this. Wishing you all a healthy and productive spring.

Conner Mckissack

1. What does risk-taking in physical or outdoor play mean to you?
2. Can you briefly describe any value or learning potential that may or may not exist in risky play?
3. Do you feel your child or children experience similar levels of freedom as you did in your own childhood?
4. How much do you think opportunity for risk-taking in play has increased or decreased for today's children?
5. If you answered question no. 4, do you feel this is a positive/negative change or appropriate for the development of today's children?

6. Do you feel there is currently a stronger concern (either among parents or professionals) for children's well-being and safety when compared to past generations?
7. In your opinion, what is the most hazardous or risky outdoor space that your child is regularly exposed to? and why have you chosen this?
8. Would you like to see in the future, more opportunity for risky outdoor play (in the community and early childhood education settings) or safer and more regulated activities?
9. Any additional comments or questions related to the topic:

A practical tool for supporting risky play in ECEC

Supporting Children in Risky Play:

A tool for understanding and supporting risky play in Early Childhood Education and Care

Introduction

Risky play in early childhood education can be a challenging subject. To some, it sounds avoidable and dangerous while others readily acknowledge the potential for learning. Not all children play the same way and this in itself can be sometimes confusing for children, parents, and professionals. How can we even agree on similar definitions for safe or risky behavior and at what point does play become risky play?

Research that supports the Finnish National Curriculum for Early Childhood education makes clear connections between play and learning. It also suggests that many learning opportunities in early childhood require experience in order to fully understand. This is especially true when during the years when children are unable to learn solely through language. Many professionals understand the value of stepping back and allowing children to experiment and experience. Risky play challenges that logic in a different way as it can sometimes feel like a child is being allowed to do something unnecessarily dangerous. Here it is important to remember that small bumps, bruises, and cuts are common in many childhoods and in most cases do not disrupt normal development. The experiences that lead to these small injuries are however very useful experiences when we consider learning.

A simple example would be telling a child “be very careful” or “you could fall from there.” These statements may not have quite the same meaning if the child has never experienced the act of falling. We need the experience, risk, and support that ultimately leads to better decision making in the near and distant future.

For this reason, the adult role when supporting children in risky play includes suggesting or intervening from time to time, as well as stepping back and allowing children space to miscalculate, misjudge, and even experience occasional negative outcomes. This is not to say that it is ok to allow children to play in truly dangerous conditions, but rather to build awareness that removing too many elements of risk or danger will certainly have a direct impact on how the children come to understand the concept of safety.

As professionals we should always follow the Finnish curriculum in which clearly defined safety values are the starting point for all our learning environments. Close observation in these environments is essential to ensuring that spaces are adequately safe for play but we also allow children to interpret and create games within these environments based on their own ideas of what is exciting or thrilling. For this reason, we see children pushing boundaries and their own capacities which may mean incorporating risk.

Why risk-taking benefits children?

Almost every parent would agree that a large part of their job is to prepare their child(children) for the future to the best of their ability. Risk-taking at a young age is the first step in preparing children for a complex, sometimes dangerous world in which courage and action can often prove to be very valuable in the face of fear and uncertainty. For many children, thrill-seeking is a very natural part of childhood. It is connected to their own curiosity about the world and their bodies. As their motor skills develop, many of them push themselves, physically testing boundaries in the same way that they might explore any other type of boundary. Once a child masters a physical skill, it is quite natural for them to expand the challenge to see how capable they truly are. Challenging physical play has a direct impact on motor-skill development which gives children a feeling of accomplishment. Strong motor skills also contribute positively to overall well-being.

Children's curiosity about their own ability can be a natural source of motivation and something, as parents and professionals, we can harvest for motivation. While no professional or parent looks forward to accidents or injuries, there are many benefits stemming from risk-taking during play. Trading a scratched knee for hours of rigorous outdoor play should be viewed as a positive outcome during childhood. Children who often play like this are more resilient and harbor less anxiety unknown factors in their own life. Risk taking during play can also have a strong anti-phobic effect that benefits children well beyond early childhood. The more aware we (as parents and professionals) are of this phenomena, the better equipped we are to support risky play.

The Assessment Tool

For these reasons, the following assessment tool has been developed in cooperation with the working life partner for this thesis project (Supporting Risky Play in Early childhood education and care) as a starting point for considering, evaluating, and supporting risky behavior in children. Recording observations surrounding risky play can be quite useful for discussing development with parents or guardians and they often suggest if a child is practicing risk-avoidance or overly risky behavior. They may even open up a space to discuss how the physical behavior affects other parts of the child's personality and what that can mean for a child's development.

For children who are avoiding risks more often than not, research suggests they are shying away out of fear or uncertainty. Understanding this may help to find better ways of supporting them to try new things or increase their own participation in games and activities. It can also be useful to discuss sources of the fear or hesitation with children and use physical activity (that they are comfortable with) to overcome those. For example, many children may not think about falling while climbing but might shy away when they feel unstable or lack the strength to maintain grip, balance, or move around freely on the climbing equipment. In these cases, there may be other activities that help to increase strength and coordination, or balance until they feel comfortable returning to climbing.

Testimony from a young girl, 5yrs old: "I'm not going to fall but I can't hold on... so it's too scary"

For those children who are almost always willing to take risks, the professional role can be to support them in better decision making and risk assessment. Encouraging them to evaluate risk in different ways and consider safer alternatives to engage in challenging physical behavior may help them to continue with exciting play but decrease the chance of injury. This is especially useful when others are involved who are less or more physically capable as children do not necessarily play with the same skills or concerns for safety. This way each child is able to express themselves physically without creating unnecessary danger to him/herself or others.

For example, a child running at full speed in a small crowded space may benefit from playing football or dodgeball as well as participating in periodic discussions highlighting the risks this behavior introduces to other children who may not be aware what is happening and step into the running path or manage to trip the child running.

Testimony from one boy, 5yrs old: "I need to go fast when they (other children) are all there... it's too boring only walking there"

The tool can give an idea of how inclined a child is to engage in risky behavior and how balanced this behavior is with regard to fear or safety. It may also help to better understand a child's interest with regard to playing styles and can be a good basis for developing physical games and individual learning goals. Do they enjoy physical play more or less than imaginary play, or problem-solving, role-playing, etc.?

Ideally the results of each assessment can be discussed in conjunction with individual learning plans during developmental meetings. Ideally, over time a more positive discussion surrounding risky play starts to develop as parents and professionals begin to embrace the value and learning potential of these behaviors.

Child's Name:

Dates of Evaluation Period:

1. How often does the child engage in behavior that could result in falling from a great height?

i.e. climbing, jumping from objects, balancing or swinging from tall objects

Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Daily

2. How often does the child engage in behavior that involves moving at a high speed or

could result in collision? i.e. swinging, sledding/sliding, skating, cycling, running uncontrollably at a high speed

Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Daily

3. How often does the child engage in activities that require the use of dangerous tools?

i.e. knives, saws or other sharp objects, ropes, lifting heavy objects

Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Daily

4. How often does the child engage in behavior that could result in falling or coming into contact with dangerous elements (deep water, thin ice, around fire, on a ledge?)

i.e. climbing, jumping from heights, balancing or swinging from tall objects

Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Daily

5. How often does the child engage in behavior that could be categorized as "rough and tumble" play?

i.e. wrestling, play fighting, using sticks as swords, very physical play

Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Daily

6. How often does the child play out of sight, disappear, or get lost?

i.e. exploring alone, playing in an unfamiliar space,

Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Daily

Based on observation or discussion, how does the child understand risk-taking or safety? (what type of games or accidents are scary?)

What types of physical games or activities does the child currently enjoy/can participate in?

Professional's response to risk-taking in play with regard to safety:

Additional Observations:

Offering further support ...

The question posed in discussion with the working life partner was if we want to further support this type of play with certain children, what are some activities we could start with? For this reason, a list of suggested activities by category has been included in this document. These are basic physical challenges which are adaptable and can easily be developed into more complex challenges depending on interest or a child's needs. Activities can utilize natural spaces and forms as well as man-made playground equipment. Staff should try to remain flexible with regard to the wishes of children during these activities and always maintain a balance between safety and challenging play.

Suggested Activities by Category:

Height: Many children enjoy being in the air or a bit higher than normal. Lifting or propping kids up when they cannot climb themselves is never a good idea but allowing them to climb up and jump down at certain heights can be a very healthy activity. Climbing ropes or using larger swings can also create a thrilling effect based on height. When access to taller spaces or height is a challenge you can increase the technical challenge at a lower height either by asking the children to participate in balancing exercises or move in a certain way. This can often keep the games exciting.

Speed: Moving quickly is an effective way to get thrills. Swinging, cycling, or simply running at high speed often creates the feeling of being borderline out of control. Sliding and sledging at high speed can offer the same feeling during wintertime. There are loads of options for incorporating speed into games in Early Childhood education. A great example if you have a little open space would be organizing Sharks and Minnows: at any point children may need to burst into full speed to avoid getting caught but when and where that happens is a surprise. They also have to navigate around other children moving at a high speed. Another option to use speed in risky play is building an obstacle course and dividing the group into teams and then do timed relays to see who can complete the course error-free with the quickest time. When larger spaces are available race courses can be built for bikes/scooters and offer checkpoints where children need to stop and complete a task before moving to the next checkpoint.

Rough and Tumble Play: This type of play occurs especially often amongst boys at a certain age and can be particularly worrisome as it often imitates fighting or the use of

weapons. Many parents will shut this down quickly but this type of playful, reciprocal aggression is often perfectly natural and developmentally desirable behavior for those engaging in the play. Often this type of play can imitate battles or chasing/escaping scenarios and involve: physical challenges like wrestling or trapping other children. Quite often this is combined with some type of role play and is a desirable challenge for both parties. This type of pretend play is also great exercise for the brain and an important part of healthy development. Many children who enjoy imaginary play will transition to these types of physical activities naturally. For professionals, close observation is critical to ensure that the behavior is reciprocal and it doesn't escalate to the point of real danger.

Playing out of sight: While this style of play is often easier to support outside of early childhood education and care facilities, it is still worth noting that there is a certain value to unsupervised play. Forests and natural settings are great for this type of play. Children are aware of the presence of responsible adults and act accordingly when they are being supervised. This is not to say that their behavior is completely different when they are not being watched but there are differences. One of the major differences is the level of responsibility they have to regulate the play. This can be in relation to other participants and behaviors within the play, having the energy to constantly create activities or keep a game moving forward, or even creating their own borders within their (sometimes) imaginary worlds becomes their responsibility. These are all answers and solutions that supervising adults come up with together during supervised play and the play takes on a completely different meaning when the children have to decide these things for themselves. Possible solutions within early childhood education and care settings could be offering groups of children separate spaces (out of eyesight) to create games and play unsupervised or for younger children building forts so that they can at least disappear for periods within a supervised setting. Some units may even allow opportunity for hide n' seek. These types of games are also great for developing independent mobility.